

PHONING IT IN

by Moe Shapiro



AESTHETICS

a poem is in the bop, not what it's formed with
a life is in the be-now, and every moment it holds in
a universe is in the both of neither one that's in it
a mystery is in the bite, no less than in the kiss

On Bonny Doon Road half a mile from Highway 1
where it snakes through coastal canyon
and I always go a little too fast
On the morning after fall's first rain
hitting a curve and starting to spin
I do what you don't want to do
I step too hard on the brake and we start to skid
Spun once, twice, three or was it four times?
Banging, bouncing
Off the road into rock and dirt
Airbags exploding like cap gun howitzers
Wife screaming, baby crying
and all I could think of was that time at San Clemente
when I was seven or eight
and a big wave caught me
bodysurfing a little too far out in front
Whirling me furiously, churning up sand, sky and water in my head

We came to rest
in shock
in the middle of the road
My glasses gone
The smoke of the airbags burning my nostrils
The edge of panic
until we got the baby out of her seat, cuddled her, and she laughed
out loud

we understand each other because
we are each other.

it was not mad passion that made it so
it was not the fire that burns in every human heart
it was not the hope for something better (or at least extinction)
it was not my occasional hour of showing off
it was none of these
it was the green green timber of a forest I have yet to see
it was the occupation of caresses
it was this dream

LET ME SPEND TIME BEHIND ROSES

I loved you, going through palaces my fingertips built unknowing
My one murmur thirsted through forests of shining salute
You are a landscape, yet stand beside me

That you are young outdarkens secrets
Countless ways you've sung
You are a live body

Kings were once dazzled at your sun-mouth
I feel a strange tender scent
You are a nest which must give off perfumes

Out of your triple window crawls an octopus
Unfathomable spiders scrape you clean
Closer hearts sing in your house of floral beat
A light of eel-hunters tints your northern tower
You are the violet ink of dying orchards

Our now lies bare
Little children fight for lonely masks
The roses are trying to chime
My blossoms are eyes to hear the garden

PROJECT UNIVERSE

first, a physical reality

jars of elements

clutter a table in front of Carl Sagan

he explains what they all are

and says that the only difference between him and them

is how he and they are organized

but he's not quite right

"how" is a part of it,

but "what" is a more important part

is what organizes Carl Sagan different than what organizes me?

our chemicals are virtually the same, but our psyches? do we have psyches?

perhaps Carl doesn't, but he must have chemicals organized as a brain

secondly, this brain operates by instinct

instinct underlies waking consciousness

and dreaming is purely instinctual

thirdly, semantic thought and the logic of grammar

define consciousness

fourthly, desire and distaste may give rise to losing and winning

fifth, is the heart of the matter
the vision
 from its brilliant fullness of noon
 from its subtle canvas of twilight
 from its indigo blot of midnight
 to the most glorious epiphanies of its blazing dawn:
it's who you are not how you are

six: you must have a direction
you shall choose and act

seven: be pleased to pay all debts (you may only cheat in your own universe)

eight: teardrops still permitted

nine: laughter only

there is a tenth one also

I am one who is beauty in search of beauty
I am one who seeks to know what is beyond the gate
I am one who exceeds excess, and plants new gardens beyond
imagination,
who senses the ruins yet to come in columned palaces of today
I am inheritor of my own testament, discoverer of what I already know,
and interpreter of my waking dreams
Tempest tossed on dry but verdant land
Entering the chapel of nature, the garden of delight, both earthly and
heavenly,
the paradise of grapes and raisins, growing out of pots of sun
I am one who grows the flower of mystery

PIECED TOGETHER OUT OF OLD DISCONTINUOUS MOMENTS
LIKE NOW

Buddha said find
out for yourself

so people came and
asked him how to do it

history repeats itself (but not as
often as you hear that repeated)

the smell of a rose does
not replace its roots

A POEM FOR OFFICER ROBLES (B.P.D. BADGE #26)

you called me a weirdo

while in your world newborn babes are left in dumpsters
and the forests are clear-cut for fastfood packaging

you called me a weirdo

while in your world police plant evidence to entrap
those presumed guilty by some official prejudice

you called me a weirdo

while in your world the masters make profits on nuclear overkill
and people with AIDS are blamed for living at all

you called me a weirdo

hell yes i'm a weirdo!

in your world i wouldn't have it any other way

HOW NOT TO GET SHOT

(Oakland, California 1976)

The busted sash lets Gary's bathroom window fall on Jackson's finger
which bleeds so much they send me to the drugstore for gauze

My walk back's on Telegraph between MacArthur and the 580
a short skinny young black man stumbles up to me
"hey, bro, ya gotta help me out"
this big beat-up old car is parked at the curb
its front passenger door is open to a tall skinny young white man
long blonde hair, in the driver's seat
smiling, and extending a hand with a pin-rolled joint in it
"I'm too stoned, can ya check it out?", croaks Bro

I'm maneuvered into mid front seat by Bro
he hops in beside me, slams the door, and exclaims in a new voice
"let's git outta here so's we can fire up!"
immediately I know I'm in trouble
Bro elbows me in the ribs and reveals what looks like the butt of a
pistol
popping out of his waistband
he raves unconvincingly about getting out of Napa, after killing his
father
all the time grinning this strangely charming smirk
then he goes through my pockets as I sit there, numbly unresisting

All I have is five bucks and some change
and most of a pack of Kools
by now we've been around the block, so they drop me beneath the
580 overpass
Bro pulls a bunch of cigarettes out of my pack and hands them to me,
gets back in the car
as they pull away he tosses me a quarter "for the bus"

Pitied even by muggers, I walk back to Gary's
it's starting to rain, a few big drops kiss my face
I still have the gauze in a little brown paper bag
but it turns out Jackson's finger is no longer bleeding

(Cairo, Egypt 1983)

Misr will fly me to Nairobi, but not without a visa
all week long, dialing the Kenyan consulate
it just rings and rings
my flight leaves tomorrow morning and it finally occurs to me
'this is Cairo!' the phone book might be wrong
down to the front desk of Hotel Ramsis
get the number known only to desk clerks and dial it at three-ten
it answers on one ring
"sure you can get a visa, just bring your passport to the consulate"

It's Friday in a Muslim country
they close at three-thirty
I rush out to the street in a panic
it's Friday in a Muslim country
not a cab in sight
an observant Copt with a car spots me
"need a ride?"

I give him the address and he knows exactly where it is
first, over the 26th of July bridge to Gezirah
then he pulls over, "where are you going?"
"to find out where it is"
three-thirty looms, he gets back in, we're off
he pulls up near the consulate right as the bell rings in my head
I'm out
I'm running full tilt for the door

a young man in uniform holding a submachine gun is standing out front

he sees me running toward him, tenses, and points his gun my way
right then, adrenalined, I swerve toward the consulate door
and the soldier deflates, exhaling
not being attacked by an American tourist

(Berkeley, California 1989)

"Get down, get down, get down!"
cop funk chorus as both doors burst open
SWAT

I'm at the kitchen table, then under it
calm prisoner of gravity
surrounded by automatic rifles
I've never been so relaxed

(San Francisco, California 1992)

Midnight Mission, need supplies
Cala Foods on South Van Ness
go up Shotwell to the parking lot
young African man, clad all in blue
a shining cap of turquoise satin
and a handgun in my face

I feel intensely pulsating fear and anger
I'm amazed to find it's not coming from me
it's coming from him
I empty my cash pocket into his hand
he looks at it, notices the twenty, nods
'ok, I've made my hit'
waving me off with his pistol, he tries some misdirection
but sure enough, looking back, I see him going the other way

back toward the projects

I march home, grab a twenty, and head back to Cala
gotta get right back on

(Oakland, California 2000)

Tzedek says
"risk your life for a small thing"

walking up Broadway, broad daylight
heading home with a bag of Wendy's
crossing Taft, the perp sidles up to me
young male cauc, dark and slight
he presses something hard and square into my side
it could have been anything, I didn't ask to see
"Don't have any money", I lied, and offered him fast food
he wasn't hungry, just walked off disappointed
I walked off home

the clouds of rose
that shout
what a human soul must
whisper

THE MYSTERIES OF MASTER THERION

Filled with the sight he went searching.
Believing in excitement and pious Antichrist,
he sought confirmation.
He walked each path, but on stones.
He dared to dream the Lord's City.
He entered in astonishment where bakers pronounce the Suffering
One.

Northward was full of thundering.
He came south to the Great Island of the dark burning.
There Life's God laid a silver sea.
There, on a Hill, he dug the miracle Body.

He is the One, and also the Paul,
who was another Joseph, another baptized by holy Ananias.
The ruby and Him are all, they have that stream of precious books,
that fine gentle grace.
We are red, surpassing wonders of books and gemstones.
Above these wretched rubies of malady, all is clear.

The mysteries descend to the Host,
"Twelve has significance to Twelve."

The Faith world shall have faith in stones.
Its subject is fallen in excessive approach,
and compelled to bewilderment.

A Miner went into the City of Death,
beyond the Goddess of Dreadful Things,
and there He told Man's story
Where celebrants protect the sacred wall,
He sang.

THE SPIRITUAL TEACHER

He can't be challenged.
You can try, but it cuts no ice.
You'll never see him lose his cool.
He has all the answers
Because he never answers anything.
He doesn't ask questions either
Because you might answer
And some answers aren't okay
Because they don't involve gratification

And after he's slept with your wife
And decided that she should leave you,
Change her name, and join his harem
He grins at you, with an unperformed wink
And says, waving his hand toward a crowd of invisible disciples

"They expect it of me!"

HOW TO LIVE AS A SINGLE NATURAL BEING (For Charles Olson)

breathe in and out
but live in the space between breaths
let your thoughts be breaths
and find the space between
eat breakfast with friends
and love your enemies
because they offer you
the opportunity to triumph over them

thereafter
benign indifference is the best revenge

take a long walk every day
even if only in your mind

study yourself constantly
but believe yourself never

forget whatever you can

A POEM FOR A FRIEND

On a beach at lowest tide
I found a broken shell
The meat inside had long since gone away
Is it empty now, I wondered,
or does it contain everything?
Likewise, when my own shell breaks
will my soul escape
or will the universe come rushing in?
The water may know
but all I hear is the breaking of the waves

MY FAITH

There is no place in the desert
to hide from the sun.
There is no way to shelter
in the shade of your own shadow.
If all that is is form, if empty
representations are all that exist
then I can never know my own
non-existence, nor is anything
communicated by the word of
"void".
A poem begins in silence,
in silence it ends,
how very like my universe.

ITALIAN POEM

the street
ingenuous as dying
reclines in garden light
a body of acacias is rustling
a thrush waits around to observe the end

thousands of acid kids in windows
rows of Adriatic toughs in muddy threadbare
corners of the breeze, dust undershirts
ardent Sabines barred from some impoverished mountains

long lime Calvary faces pass by, thick and low
slowly closer to the sacred monuments
the indescribable wet heap of the vice houses
as thousands sit in the kisses of a gesture

a fog of sweat is on the world
the sun's hand sharpens fast
a little inferno

THE MYTH OF DISHYPHUS

stainless steel pot encrusted with dried-on rice
cast-iron skillet with a layer of solidified bacon grease covering
patches of unidentifiable fried-on food
an oven rack coated with baked-on bread crumbs

I set to work with a vengeance, scrubbing, scraping, rinsing, repeating
well aware that any sense of accomplishment will eventually vanish
with the knowledge that this will all be done again tomorrow

night falls heavy in the olive grove
wolves go walking hand in hand
through wild thickets

oaks grow over prelates
and flowers over the already dead
birds and black coolness
where night is

your lips are wild
your wall of songs
a golden boat of resting gentle

I DON'T KNOW, BUT I KNOW

When we die
it's either into blackness
or into a light that's purple and gold and music all at once

Which will you see?
It's not how good you've been
that determines the nature of your eternal afterlife

It's not the hours
of prayer or meditation
or the fickle affections of some all-powerful deity

It's grace or chance
or quantum fluctuations
of infinite probabilities becoming manifest destiny

So relax
We all will surely die
That's the lie that levels, frees, and pacifies

A POEM FOR HUGH

It always works,
even when I crack
my toes against the concrete.
Suddenly the lights go on,
it's clear; toes do not
belong where the thinness
of skin and the proximity
of concrete make for bruise or
blood dripping on the sidewalk.
And now I walk on the grass.
It always works.

EXTRACTED POEM

1

The rhythm of being is one continuous beat
The surface is as deep
as you can get
I guess that's the point
of mirrors

2

Wind clapping in a neighbor's pillowcases
diet root beer will not save America
a buzz-saw whined in the distance
a fly buzzed around the room
avoiding my hand until he tired
of playing and made a beeline
for the door
I listened to some silence
blinding bright blackness
a febrile night
haunted by stars & space
can nonexistence exist?

A drop of rain dies every time the sun comes out
and a tear could do the same

3

There is something about clear night skies
that whispers to me
in countless unseen stars
like unheard songs
behind the cold black desert wind
an ache to shoot rainbows at pigeons
and drown in mist
putting pain where we used to be well as ceremonies,
and figuring it for witches

4

Dusk,
and the mournful chant of unseen muezzins tingles in the heavy air
where is a well for me to drink from,
as clouds & fragments prepare my death?
there's grandeur in vein & leaf
the mice aloud
such small rustling
the way of all empires is death
and symmetry is imbalance righting itself by tilting the world

5

A man went boating
in the placid waters
of a tiny mountain tarn.
So strange that he should drown in the flood tide
of his own dry dream.

6

The search for realization is empty
Let the final suffering be
The givens are all one

7

To bathe in a fragrant swell of polyphonic melody
is nothing to the song the universal being sings
 to respect confusion
 we must allow awareness
 to roar in it
 a lion's fearless proclamation roar:
“I am going by where I am going
 in my enchanted robe
 the serpent way and me
 who put the name of Mother to it”

8

Great beauty
can only develop
in perilous deeds
while blame
is nineteenth century
and confession
should have leisure
as do butterflies

9

That indifference does nothing is no surprise
but that love does nothing but balance out the indifference is not
expected

THE EYES OF WHEN

I walked the only way I could when hot dreams went on alone
Not giving in to reality
Only jutting fibers remembering light
Not ancient
Dreaming loneliness instead, and houses where loneliness is given
out
It's the empty reality
Yet, my heart rages in love, and no one who's watched me cry has
been there

EIGHT SHORT POEMS FROM EARTH TO SKY

an eagle nears the sun
but all we see is its shadow

Christ's miraculous corpse, now ordinary, decays
a pus-drenched beehive between his ribs

darkness illuminates all
seven holes in your head

where you see a coffin
dead men see nothing

eat an apple before the worms do

on Bali
shadows are used to enlighten

these locks turn keys into comprehension

inside the golden suit of armor was a wonderful red bird which
opening its eyes
invented day

INVITATION TO SADHANA

Have at that silent hill,

that 'not' which cradles the numberless words.

Meditation, populous as slumbers and fluttering with form,
give me a mirror and show me how to watch.

I want to be like water

born of rain that

falls from heaven but welling up from springs hidden deep
in the bowels of the earth

I want to flow

like a seasonal

creek, into successive rivers until, yielding

always to the pull

of gravity, I reach the great all-knowing

sea

and in that epic journey I will passively conform to every bend &
contour around & over which I pour, never offering resistance, even as
the

hardest of stone wears down

with my passing

and then when it gets too hot

I'll simply evaporate

HEAVEN IS LAMENTABLE

In that hour of darkness

I supplicate the emperor of night

On dragon day

I head to the palace of not thunder, but fire

At the palace I dream the trees have granted my request

But I will not be their wonderful wonder

The ancients of everywhere need no burial

Theirs is called under grass, and shouting, and no air

A POEM FOR PETER'S 60TH

60 is so much younger now
than when our folks turned 60
Is that because we never grew up
or that they did?

I suspect they may have felt just as surprised as we are
Wasn't it just yesterday that I picked a scab off these six year old
hands?

Surely this wrinkled flesh all spotted with age belongs to Grandma
Yes, it surely does.
For I am Grandma
You are Grandma
The same child that lives in us
still lived in her, even at 93

We are not deluded when we live our youth behind this death mask
When we saw the old man hollering at Robby Thompson over a play
at second base
When we thought he was acting like a little kid
That was when we were deluded
Because he WAS a little kid

Now Robby, past 50 himself
still covers second in his soul
as if he was back in Little League
Your inner baby still cries over burnt toast
I dream my way through embodied existence
We're dead already, and yet to be born
Now is the only moment to exist, and it doesn't
Six or 60 means nothing to the void

A still, small voice
spoke up
from the back of the burning bus.

"Driver,
why am I talking to myself?",
it said.

"Because there ain't nobody
but me, buddy.",

the driver mused,
as if anyone else
could hear.

I got off at Church and Market.

Forgetfulness, sleep, and death.

FOR MARY OLIVER

I don't notice much. A bobcat in the tall grass along the path through the great meadow. An eagle one day, another day a hawk, circling high above. Out in great distance the mountains beyond the bay and the sea from which it eventuates. Moths, in season, flitting amid the milkweed that edges the trail. Grass snakes, long and short, slithering past. Squirrels, deer, going about their business, but watchful, ready at any moment to bolt, knowing that any animal on two legs, wearing clothes, can never be fully trusted.

HER KISSES

You haven't been kissed
Until you've been kissed by everything
It'll take your breath away
Hell, it'll take your entire being away
and knock you to the floor while you don't exist

Which is where you'll awaken once more to life
With the goofiest grin on your face
and a heart as open to every possibility
as it's possible to be

And if you say anything at all
It'll just be "Wow!"

DREAM

We sit in the meadow
almost touching
Your eyes request my lips
"I've never felt this close to anyone," you whisper
I can't move
I want to kiss your shoulder
with my hand
I can't speak
I want to say, "I love you"
I just gaze into your eyes
Our faces are so close together

EXTRA INNINGS

Like a dead pull hitter
suddenly going the opposite way
she freezes me in left
and everything I've learned
about her tendencies and angles off the bat
is useless

Her ball slices to fall just fair
a foot from my glove
I chase it down in the corner
just in time to turn and see her
take third standing up

I love you, honey, and that's no error
but couldn't you just whiff every once in a while?